

Adolescents' Social Cognitive Beliefs about Misbehavior in School

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by

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Abstract

The present study examined differences in social cognitive beliefs about school misbehavior and school authority among fifty-two seventh grade students (M age = 13.04 years). Participants provided self-report ratings of their actual engagement in school transgressions, which, along with teacher ratings, resulted in the creation of “*frequent misbehavers*” ($N = 22$) and “*non-misbehavers*” ($N = 30$) groups. Using a semi-structured interview, participants were asked to make judgments regarding the legitimacy of engaging in various school transgressions and to provide justifications for each judgment. Responses were coded and interpreted within the framework of the social domain theory (Turiel, 1983). As predicted, the results indicated that misbehaving students rejected school authority to regulate rules governing school misbehavior, instead asserting personal jurisdiction over these issues. It was also found that misbehaving students were more likely to justify their engagement in misbehavior using personal and pragmatic reasoning and less likely to appeal to conventional and prudential reasoning in their justifications.

Adolescents' Social Cognitive Beliefs about Misbehavior in School

The current study examined ways in which middle adolescents reason about and justify their opinions regarding common school misbehaviors and classroom disruptions. Using the assumptions and methodologies suggested by the social domain theory (Turiel, 1983, 2002), judgments and justifications of frequently misbehaving and non-misbehaving students were directly compared using a semi-structured interview. Students were also asked to describe their reasoning regarding various rules governing common school misbehaviors and the legitimacy of the school's authority to make and enforce those rules.

School Misbehavior

School misbehavior can take on several different forms including fighting, bullying, talking back to teachers, vandalizing school property, stealing, engaging in the use or distribution of illegal substances, as well as a number of other behaviors that disrupt the overall positive flow of classroom and school activities. Sadly, the negative effects of such misbehavior have serious consequences for everyone involved. Previous research has demonstrated that students who frequently misbehave have overall lower grades, higher drop-out rates, and less success after high school (Finn, Fish, & Scott, 2008). Furthermore, early student misbehavior in school and low academic achievement have been described as key risk factors linked to a greater likelihood of illicit drug use, alcohol use and dependency, and cigarette use (Bryant, Schulenberg, Bachman, O'Malley, & Johnson, 2000).

In recent decades there have been growing concerns regarding student misbehavior and school violence. With no school immune, student misbehavior and even violence has become commonplace and seen ranging from disrespecting authority figures within the school, bullying

fellow students, distributing drugs or engaging in drug use on school grounds to the more severe and increasing occurrences of school shootings and bullying-related suicides. Therefore, attempts to better understand the underlying beliefs that students themselves hold about misbehavior in the school can provide not only important findings and insight into how students perceive school rules and authority, but also in developing the most effective disciplinary strategies and improving the outcomes of efforts in combating important issues such as bullying, violence, and adolescent drug use.

School discipline policies have been a topic of debate regarding how best to address disruptive behaviors in schools. Way (2011) examined the question of how student perceptions of school disciplinary practices and authority are related to subsequent classroom and school behavior. Results of this study found that students were more likely to disobey school rules and the teachers enforcing them when they believed such behaviors were acceptable. Moreover, students who believed that it was acceptable to disobey school rules and teachers were also more disruptive in schools with harsher punishments than similar students in schools with more lenient punishment policies. Beliefs of fairness were also an important factor regulating student behavior; students who judged school disciplinary factors as fair tended to be better behaved.

According to *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2010*, jointly published annually by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), one or more criminal incidents were recorded as having taken place on school grounds by 85% of public schools during the 2007-08 school year. Additionally, 75% of public schools reported one or more violent criminal incidents having taken place at school. Furthermore, during the same school year, a greater percentage of teachers employed by public schools reported having been threatened with injury (10%) compared to 7% of town school teachers and 6% of suburban and

rural school teachers. Bullying was reported as having occurred on a daily or weekly basis by 25% of public schools. Eleven percent of public schools reported acts of (nonverbal) disrespect for teachers on a daily or weekly basis and 6% reported verbal abuse of teachers by students.

Furthermore, widespread disorder in the classroom was reported by 4% of public schools during the 2007-08 school year. Teachers agreed or strongly agreed that their teaching was interrupted by student misbehavior in the classroom (34% of teachers) as well as by student tardiness and class cutting (32% of teachers). In terms of student bullying, in 2007 32% of students ages 12-18 reported having been bullied at school during that year; 21% said they had experienced bullying in the form of being made fun of, 18% reported being the subject of rumors, and 11% said that they had been shoved, pushed, tripped, or spit on. More recent reports collected in 2009 recorded that 4% of male students, grades 9-12, having been threatened or injured with a weapon at school during the past year. Furthermore, 27% of males reported having carried a weapon anywhere and 9% reported having carried a weapon on school property. Considering the prevalence of such violence and misbehavior seen within schools, the goal of the present study is to provide a better understanding of the etiology of school misbehavior and the cognitive beliefs that reinforce such behaviors as well as the factors that influence those beliefs.

Correlates of School Misbehavior

Research has identified many factors associated with the development of school misbehavior in adolescence. The school environment is a common focus as a predictor of adolescent misbehavior. In a longitudinal study, Wang and Dishion (2011) followed a sample of American middle school students from grades six through eight to assess the relationship between problem behavior and adolescents' perceptions of four dimensions of school climate:

academic support, teacher social support, peer social support, and school behavior management. Analyses revealed that problem behavior was significantly negatively correlated with each aspect of school climate. They also found that high levels of behavioral management, or the extent to which the school establishes clear-cut and consistent rules and discipline as well as fair and respectful student-adult interactions, seemed to counteract the negative effect of deviant peer affiliation on problem behavior.

Personality factors have also been associated with the development of problem behavior. Hessler and Katz (2010) examined the relationship between adolescents' emotional competence (i.e., awareness, expressivity, and regulation) and risky behavior (i.e., hard drug use, promiscuity, and behavior problems) in a longitudinal study that followed students from 9 to 16 years of age. Findings from this study indicated that each area of risky behavior was associated with deficits in emotional related skills. Children with poor emotional awareness and regulation, primarily pertaining to anger, had a much greater likelihood of using hard drugs. Moreover, difficulties in regulating emotions (particularly sadness) were linked to a greater number of sexual partners.

Bullying behaviors seen within the school context have also received much attention over the last decade. Carlson and Cornell (2008) examined aggressive attitudes of students who had engaged in bullying behaviors over two consecutive years. Students who had been classified as bullies during the first year of the study but ceased their bullying behaviors, were termed desistent bullies while those who continued patterns of bullying behavior during the second year were then classified as persistent bullies. Findings from their study indicated that across all of the participants, aggressive attitudes were associated with poor grades and increased discipline infractions. The persistent bullies, however, showed the greatest aggressive attitudes and got into

more trouble in school compared to both the desistent and control groups. Finally, the GPA's of persistent bullies suffered the most with an average of a 2.6 compared to the control group (average GPA of 3.2) and the desistent bullies (average GPA of 3.1).

Students who engage in bullying not only suffer the consequences of poorer grades and lower school engagement, but also the risk of falling into more serious prolonged trouble both in and outside of school. Frequent misbehavior has been identified as a common precursor of general delinquency. Findings from a study by Weerman et. al. (2007) suggested that more serious misbehaviors committed in school had a stronger correlation to general delinquency than for less serious forms of delinquency. Furthermore, much attention has been given to analyzing the relationship between bullying behaviors within the school and other serious forms of misbehavior outside of school. Rigby and Cox (1996) found significant relationships between bullying behaviors and shoplifting, writing graffiti, and contact with police in a sample of Australian high school students. Moreover, using a sample of students in Sweden, Andershed et al. (2001) found a strong relationship between students who frequently displayed bullying behaviors in school and subsequent violent behaviors on the street. Results of a study by Junger-Tas and Van Kesteren (1999) suggested that bullies reported engaging more often in bad habits such as drinking, smoking, and using soft drugs.

There are many variables that influence engagement in school and classroom misbehavior ranging from characteristics of the school environment to individual personality differences. The purpose of this study, however, was to explore how students themselves think about and justify their beliefs regarding problem behavior. Particularly, the goal was to examine whether students actively think about and make judgments regarding everyday issues they

encounter as well as how those justifications differ between groups of students who choose to misbehave and those who do not.

Social Domain Theory

A great deal of the research on adolescent misbehavior has been based on reports from parents, teachers, and principals as well as the observations of researchers. While such studies have contributed greatly to our understanding of adolescent problem behavior within the school system, the focus of the present study was to examine how students themselves reason about and justify their decisions regarding whether they choose to misbehave. Specifically, we hoped to identify the ways in which misbehaving and non-misbehaving adolescents differ in their judgments and justifications of various transgressions commonly observed within schools and classrooms. This focus on developing beliefs make the social domain theory (Turiel, 1983, 2002) the ideal theoretical framework to locate the research questions and methodologies.

One of the major tenets of the Social Domain Theory is that as individuals interact with their social environment, they select, interpret, and organize those interactions which are used to construct their social judgments (Turiel, 1979; 1983; 1998; 2002). Social judgments then are organized and build upon the stored knowledge of specific interactions with the social world and exist as independent domains of social knowledge. These domains include the moral, social conventional, personal, and prudential domains.

Rules within the *moral domain* exist to regulate the interactions between individuals (Smetana, 1995). Moral rules pertain to the actions that may result in negative consequences to others and describe how individuals ought to behave toward one another. Some moral issues include physical harm (hitting another student), psychological harm (making fun of a peer,

spreading rumors), fairness, and justice. While moral rules define acceptable behavior across all situations and contexts, *social conventions* are situation and context specific and thus relative to the context in which they were created. These are agreed-upon behavioral uniformities within a specific social system (Smetana, 1995; Turiel, 1983). Social norms and expectations, politeness and forms of address are examples of social conventions. Interestingly, Smetana (1981) found that children as young as three years old consistently differentiated between the moral and social domains. In a study by Nucci and Herman (1982) behaviorally disordered children and normally behaved children were examined. Findings suggested that both groups reported moral transgressions as more wrong than conventional ones and least wrong were the violations of rules for personal issues. However, it was also shown that the normally behaved children were more likely to view moral transgressions as wrong even when no rules prohibited them. Furthermore, the behaviorally disordered children focused more on the conventional components of moral transgressions such as likelihood of punishment.

Issues within the *personal domain* are considered to be matters pertaining only to the actors themselves and outside of the jurisdiction of social regulations and moral concerns (Nucci, 1977). Rather than matters of right and wrong, personal issues are more matters of personal choice and preference (Smetana, 2002). Therefore, those issues not seen as negatively affecting others and not regulated by conventions within the actor's society are considered personal issues. Like moral issues, issues within the *prudential domain* also involve interpersonal harm but here, only the actor is affected by his or her transgressions. Prudential issues primarily pertain to the health, safety, and comfort of the actor (Smetana, 2011). For example, choosing to do drugs or drive without a seatbelt are considered issues that would fall within the prudential domain of social reasoning.

Studies regarding adolescents' views on the legitimacy of authority over issues pertaining to the various domains suggests that while adolescents view moral, social conventional, and prudential issues as subject to parental authority, with age there is a shift in which adolescents increasingly view multifaceted (issues involving multiple domains) and personal issues as matters of personal choice and out of the realm of parental authority (Smetana, 1988; Smetana & Asquith, 1994). Thus, with increases in autonomy and the expanding personal domain characteristic of the transition from childhood into adolescence, conflicts over the boundaries of personal jurisdiction often arise in adolescent-parent relationships. Smetana and Asquith (1994) examined this trend among a sample of sixth, eighth and tenth grade students and their parents. Participants were asked to judge the legitimacy of parental authority over hypothetical issues within each domain and rate the frequency and intensity of conflicts. Overall, both parents and adolescents agreed that parents have legitimate authority over moral and conventional issues throughout adolescence citing moral and conventional concerns. Issues pertaining to the adolescents' personal jurisdiction demonstrated the most significant shifts in parental authority; multifaceted, friendship, prudential, and personal issues were seen by parents as more contingent on parental authority while adolescents treated these issues as matters of personal concern and under personal jurisdiction.

Research has also examined adolescents' conceptions of the legitimacy of parental authority over specific problem behaviors. Jackson (2002) assessed the relationship between adolescent alcohol and cigarette use and their conceptions regarding the legitimacy of parental authority over these issues. Results of this study demonstrated that students who recognized their parents as having the legitimate authority to regulate smoking and alcohol consumption were less likely to engage in such behaviors. Moreover, one in five respondents denied parental

authority over these issues. Current smoking behaviors of these adolescents were found to be four times more likely while reports of current alcohol use was 3.8 times more likely than those adolescents who affirmed legitimate parental authority.

Kuhn and Laird (2011) examined individual differences in adolescents' legitimacy beliefs of parental authority as predicted by autonomous experiences, psychological control of parents, and adolescent characteristics. Findings suggest that legitimacy beliefs are weaker among adolescents who experienced premature autonomy and decision making and more psychologically controlling parental relationships. Adolescent characteristics that were also predictive of weaker legitimacy beliefs included being more resistant to control, advanced in pubertal development, and African American compared to their adolescent counterparts. Overall, results demonstrated that adolescents' legitimacy beliefs weaken developmentally, with the most drastic declines taking place during the middle school years.

Social Domain Theory and School Misbehavior

While much of the previous research on adolescent problem behavior has made use of observational methods and teacher and parent reports of problem behavior, social domain methods offer essential advantages in that they allow for better exploration of how adolescents *themselves* think about misbehavior. Many studies have used social domain methods to assess various forms of adolescent misbehavior and delinquency. In the case of adolescent drug use, Killen, Leviton, and Cahill (1991) asked adolescents to evaluate drug use in comparison to other social and moral transgressions. In general, drug use was evaluated as either a moral or personal issue and rarely as a social conventional issue. Moreover, it was also found that adolescents' conceived drug use as involving a mixture of moral, personal, and social conventional

judgments. Furthermore, adolescents in this study also made domain distinctions in their evaluations regarding the legality of the given drug type; illegal “hard” drugs like crack and cocaine were classified as moral transgressions while legal “soft” drugs like nicotine and caffeine were seen as personal decisions. Another particularly influential study regarding adolescent drug use by Nucci, Guerra, and Lee (1991) captures the tendency for youths’ merging their personal and prudential domains during adolescence. In their study, they differentiated between two groups of American youth as “low drug users” who experimented with alcohol and soft drugs but were not regular users and “high drug users” who more regularly engaged in drug use and alcohol consumption and did not confine themselves only to the use of soft drugs. Findings of this study suggested that both the high and the low drug use groups were more likely to view drug use as a matter of personal choice or prudence rather than one of morality or social convention. The high drug use group, however, was more likely to view drug use as a personal rather than prudential matter as well as view themselves as the only legitimate authority regulating drug use. Additionally, the high drug use group was also more likely to discount the harmfulness and view it as less wrong compared to the low drug use group.

Concepts of social convention are especially important in the discussion of problem behavior as seen in adolescence. Social conventions are viewed as inherent to the social system in which they originated and pertain primarily to rules, authority, and the expectations held by others (Turiel, 1978; Geiger & Turiel, 1983). Moreover, an individual’s understandings of social convention are shaped by his or her concepts of social organization. According to Turiel (1978), seven distinct levels characterize the development of our understandings of social conventional concepts. Here, affirmation levels (levels 1, 3, 5, and 7) describe the creation of new systems of thought while negation levels (levels 2, 4, and 6) refer to the departure away from the previous

system of thought leading to the creation of the following level of conceptualization. Moreover, the negation levels reflect a rejection of importance for institutional rules and expectations of authority. Each increasing level simply reflects changes in the individual's conceptions of the social system and the role of conventions in coordinating social interactions.

In a study by Geiger and Turiel (1983) social conventional thinking among middle school children was assessed in terms of its relationship with disruptive school behaviors while also emphasizing the importance of age-related changes in children's understandings of social convention. During the middle school years, adolescents transition from the affirmation level 3 to the negation level 4 and in doing so the authors suggest that they may come into conflict with many of the institutional rules and expectations of those in authority. Thus, the authors hypothesized that the disruptive behaviors of some students may be paralleled by the shift from the affirmations of level 3 to the negations of level 4. Results of this study confirmed the hypotheses finding that many students whose thinking is characteristic of level 4 negation of conventional concepts reject the need and importance of classroom rules and expectations viewing them as unreasonable constraints which then brings them into conflict with school authority figures such as teachers and administrators who must enforce those school and classroom rules. It was also suggested that other types of judgments in addition to conventional judgments contribute to students' behavior in school. Therefore, it is important to consider the multifaceted nature of behavior and the influence of multiple domains in behavioral decisions.

Present Study

The purpose of this present study was to determine how a sample of middle school students identified as regularly exhibiting problem behavior differed from non-misbehaving

students in the ways that they reasoned about and justified their engagement in various school and classroom transgressions. Developed for the present study, the School Misbehavior Survey was used to determine students' membership in the *misbehaving* and *non-misbehaving* comparison groups. Using social domain theory, the responses provided by students during a semi-structured interview were assessed in order to identify any differences in how the two groups classified various transgressions according to each domain. Specifically, students were asked whether they thought that it was 'OK' or 'NOT OK' to engage in each behavior and then to provide a justification for their answer.

Misbehaviors Assessed

Two main classes of misbehavior have been differentiated: classroom misbehavior and school misbehavior (Finn, Fisher, & Scott, 2008). Classroom misbehaviors are those that interfere with the teacher's ability to run the class and interfere with the instruction process. These can include misbehaviors such as skipping or coming late to class, cheating on assignments or exams, talking back or acting up thus disrupting lessons, and leaving one's seat during a lesson. While classroom misbehaviors are often dealt with by the teacher, school misbehaviors are more likely to be addressed by the school administration. School misbehaviors include truancy, stealing, fighting, bullying, using or distributing illegal substances on school grounds, smoking cigarettes, and vandalism.

School misbehaviors were categorized using the social domain framework into four categories (Smetana & Bitz, 1996). These four categories included the moral (e.g., fighting, lying, stealing, bullying), conventional (e.g., misbehaving or acting up in class, coming late to class, swearing), prudential (e.g., smoking cigarettes, coming to school drunk or high), and

contextually conventional (e.g., leaving the classroom to go to the restroom without permission, passing notes to friends in class, kissing a boyfriend or girlfriend in the hall) domains. Here, they defined contextually conventional issues as those that are considered to be personal outside the school but legitimately regulated inside the school. In the present study, students were asked to reason about engagement in conventional and contextually conventional issues.

Goals and Hypotheses

The first goal of this study was to compare the legitimacy judgments of the misbehaving and non-misbehaving groups. That is, we looked to examine the differences between the two groups in the degree to which engaging in the behavior were considered to be OK or not OK. Another goal of this study was to determine whether misbehaving and non-misbehaving groups used qualitatively different justifications in supporting their judgments.

It was hypothesized that the misbehaving and non-misbehaving groups would differ in the types of justifications used to support their beliefs regarding school misbehavior. First, it was predicted that the misbehaving group would be more likely to judge engagement in misbehavior as legitimate. Moreover, the misbehaving group was expected to reject school authority to govern these behaviors more than would the non-misbehaving group. These differences were expected to be more pronounced among contextually conventional issues than among conventional issues. It was expected that misbehaving students would be more likely than non-misbehaving students to assert personal jurisdiction over these issues and less likely to endorse moral or conventional reasoning.

Methods

Participants

The initial overall sample for this study included 67 seventh grade students, 28 males and 36 females, ranging in age from 12.13 to 14.95 years ($M=13.07$, $SD=0.52$) from Grant Middle School in the Marion City School District. In order to confirm membership in each group, each participant's rating on the School Misbehavior Survey was matched with their initial behavior report provided by school administrators. From the overall sample, the confirmed group sample of the misbehaving group consisted of those students having both scored in the top 50% of the School Misbehavior Survey and initial reports frequent misbehavior from school administrators. Likewise, confirmed membership in the non-misbehaving group consisted of those students scoring in the bottom 50% of the School Misbehavior Survey with initial reports of positive behavior by school administrators. Self-report of problem behavior engagement on the 7-point Likert scale were significantly different between misbehaving and nonmisbehaving students, $t(50) = -7.43$, $p < .001$ (Means = 3.39, 1.33 for misbehaving and nonmisbehaving, respectively). Accordingly, the final confirmed sample consisted of 52 participants, 24 males and 28 females who ranged in age from 12.13 to 14.28 years with a mean age of 13.04 years ($SD=.47$). The misbehaving group consisted of 22 students (11 males, 11 females) and the non-misbehaving group consisted of 30 students (13 males, 17 females). The sample was 9.6% African American, 78.8% Caucasian, 3.8% Hispanic, 3.8% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 3.8% other. There was no significant difference in age, sex, ethnicity, or mother/father educational attainment between the initial overall sample and the final confirmed sample.

The misbehaving group was selected with the help of the school administrators who provided a list of students with a record of misbehavior during the present or previous school year. Such misbehavior was defined by meeting one or more of the following requirements: at least three referrals for discipline, at least one in-school suspension, or at least one out of school suspension. The non-misbehaving group was defined by meeting all of the following requirements: no more than one referral for discipline, no in-school suspension, and no out of school suspensions. Determinations were not made by accessing any student academic records but instead, determinations were completed by teachers and guidance counselors using only their personal experience with students. Because students were identified into each group prior to obtaining parental permission, no school records were accessed.

Procedure

Project staff met with school administrators (guidance counselor, principal, vice principal) and sixth grade teachers to develop a list of students that met the criteria required for inclusion to the misbehaving and non-misbehaving comparison groups. A list of 60 students for each group was created and then the two lists were combined to create a recruitment pool of 120 students. In order to protect the privacy of the students, the project staff was only provided access to the general recruitment list of 120 students and had no knowledge of the specific group to which students belonged to. Project staff then held recruitment meetings over the course of two days at the middle school in order to meet with the pool of potential participants and discuss the study. During this initial recruitment, the principal investigator described the overall purpose of the study to students and discussed the consent process and the need for parental permission letters to be signed before becoming involved in the project. However, it was not stated that the project would be comparing misbehaving and non-misbehaving students; instead, the study was

presented as an examination of how different types of students think about misbehavior. All 120 students were given information packets that included a letter to the student's parent that described the study and a parental permission form. Students were then asked to return the completed parental permission form to a locked box in the school's main office. To encourage participation in the study, each child who chose to participate received a \$20 gift-certificate to Wal-Mart.

Once the first completed parental permission forms were returned, data collection began. At that time, only the principal investigator (not research assistants collecting data) gained access to the students' group membership. On each day of data collection, the identities of students to be interviewed were randomly selected by the guidance counselor.

Data collection took place in the middle school's media center/ library during students' "Encore courses" which are non-core courses such as health, technology, and music. Each student met with one research assistant to complete the interview. When the student arrived at the session, the assistant would record the student's name and his or her corresponding ID number. The research assistant would then read the questionnaire script that detailed the instructions and emphasized the voluntary nature of the study. Next, the students were asked if they had any questions and then the students were given the assent form to complete. After assent was obtained, students completed the questionnaire. Once the questionnaire was completed, students were again asked if they had any questions. The interview followed and once completed, the students were reminded that they could still ask any questions that they might have and that contact information for the principal investigator and Office of Responsible Research Practices was included on their copy of the assent form.

Measures

Engagement in school and classroom misbehavior. Student membership in the *misbehaving* and *non-misbehaving* comparison groups was confirmed using the School Misbehavior Survey, developed for this study, which assessed students' engagement in school and classroom misbehavior. To ensure that the items included in the School Misbehavior Survey were suitable for use in this study, the survey was first piloted at Buckeye Valley Middle School in Delaware County, Ohio. The twenty-four items included: Fighting with or threatening other students, spreading rumors or gossip about another student, teasing or making fun of another student, vandalizing school property, stealing money from another student, lying to a teacher, leaving classroom without permission, texting in class, passing notes to friends in class, not wearing appropriate clothing to school, smoking cigarettes in school or on school grounds, coming to school high or drunk, drinking alcohol or doing drugs in school, refusing to do school work, misbehaving or acting up in class, swearing in the halls, interrupting the teacher during a lesson, coming to class late, talking back to teacher, and cheating on an assignment or exam. Items asking whether they have been in trouble at school were also included: getting detention, getting sent out of class, getting suspended from school, getting sent to the principal. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate how often they participated in each of the behaviors on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never happens) to 7 (happens very often). The sums of the item ratings were obtained to get overall measures of problem behavior; a higher rating is indicative of more school misbehavior.

Semi-structured interview. Trained undergraduate interviewers administered an open-ended, semi-structured interview to assess the social cognitive beliefs of students about school and classroom misbehaviors. The interview as well as the opening remarks and instructions to

participants is presented in Appendix A. Six misbehavior issues were printed on 3" x 5" index cards. The misbehavior issues included three *conventional* issues (i.e., coming to class late, misbehaving or acting up in class, and talking back to teachers) and three *contextually conventional* issues (i.e., kissing a boyfriend or girlfriend in the hallway, passing notes to friends in class, running in the hallways). The interviewer presented the issue to the participant and asked whether they thought it was "OK or not OK" to engage in each one of the six school misbehaviors (Question #1). Responses to the Legitimacy questions were coded as '1' for OK to engage and '0' for not OK to engage (Kappa=.97). Mean ratings of conventional and contextually conventional issues were computed for statistical analyses.

Participants were then asked to provide a justification for their response ("Why?" or "Why not?"). Based on previous research (Daddis, 2008), eight mutually exclusive categories were used to code the justification responses (see Table 1). Responses were then collapsed into five superordinate categories for analysis (moral, prudential, conventional, personal, and pragmatic justifications). Participants were given the opportunity to provide multiple justifications for each question which were transformed into proportion scores after coding (Kappa=.90)

The next questions assessed students' beliefs regarding the legitimacy of the school to create and enforce rules about misbehavior. First, students were asked, "Do you think that the school has a right to stop students from _____?". Responses were coded as '1' for school does have the right and '0' for the school does not have the right (Kappa=.97). Justifications for responses were elicited by asking, "Why?" or "Why not?" As above, justification responses were coded using the same eight mutually exclusive categories.

Results

Plan of Analysis

There were four sets of analyses. The first two sets examined mean differences between misbehaving and non-misbehaving in their judgments of the legitimacy of engagement in school misbehavior and in the legitimacy of the school's authority to govern misbehavior. These were analyzed with separate repeated measures ANOVAs. The last two sets of analyses examined whether engagement in school misbehavior was associated with the use of different types of justifications (i.e., justifications for the above judgments of the legitimacy of engagement in school misbehavior and in the legitimacy of the school's authority to govern misbehavior). Student gender was included in all analyses as a control variable.

Legitimacy of Engagement in School Misbehavior

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted using gender and misbehavior groups as between-group independent variables and the legitimacy of engaging ratings by domain (conventional vs. contextually conventional) as dependent variables. Results indicated a significant main effect for domain of issue, $F(1, 47) = 9.89, p < .01, \eta^2 = .17$, as students reported that engagement in contextually conventional issues was more legitimate than engagement in conventional issues (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations). Moreover, a main effect for misbehavior was found to be significant, $F(1, 47) = 8.08, p < .01, \eta^2 = .15$. Across issues, those students in the misbehaving group were more likely to assert the legitimacy of engaging in misbehavior than would non-misbehaving students. As predicted, these effects were qualified by a significant interaction effect between group and type of issue, $F(1, 47) = 8.78, p < .01, \eta^2 = .16$. Post-hoc paired sample t-tests revealed that non-misbehaving students did not differentiate

between contextually conventional and conventional issues, whereas the misbehaving students were more likely to judge engagement in contextually conventional issues as legitimate than they did conventional issues, $t(21) = -3.22, p < .01, r^2 = .33$.

Legitimacy of School Authority

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted using gender and misbehavior groups as between-group independent variables and the legitimacy of school authority ratings by domain (conventional vs. contextually conventional) as dependent variables. Analyses revealed a main effect of misbehavior group, $F(1, 61) = 9.43, p = .01, \eta^2 = .13$, as misbehaving students were more likely than non-misbehaving students to reject school authority to regulate rules. Moreover, results indicated a marginally significant interaction effect between behavior group and type of issue, $F(1, 47) = 3.53, p = .06, \eta^2 = .07$. Post-hoc paired sample t-tests revealed that non-misbehaving students did not differentiate between contextually conventional and conventional issues. There was a trend in the data indicating that misbehaving students were more likely to reject school authority over contextually conventional issues than over conventional issues, $t(21) = 1.67, p = .10, r^2 = .12$ (see Table 3 for means).

Justifications of Legitimacy of Engagement Judgments

Table 4 presents the justifications used to support the above described legitimacy ratings by domain. In both sets of regression analyses, gender was entered in the first step as a control variable and students self-report of engagement in school misbehavior was entered in the second step. Final betas are presented in Tables 5 and 6. When students were asked to justify their judgments regarding the legitimacy of engagement in school misbehavior, there were significant associations between problem behavior and the types of reasoning they used. As engagement in

school misbehavior increased, the use of personal and pragmatic justifications increased. In contrast, school misbehavior was negatively associated with appeals to conventional and prudential reasoning. The positive association between school misbehavior and the use of moral reasoning was marginally significant. When justifying their judgments regarding the schools ability to regulate misbehaviors, engagement in misbehavior was negatively associated with conventional reasoning and positively associated with personal reasoning. That is, those who engage in more school misbehavior are more likely to assert personal justifications and less likely to appeal to conventional justifications when reasoning about the limits of school authority to regulate behavior.

Discussion

Results of the study demonstrated that frequently misbehaving and non-misbehaving students use qualitatively different types of reasoning when making judgments and justifying their beliefs regarding everyday school misbehavior. As expected, misbehaving students were found to judge engagement in contextually conventional issues such as running in the halls, kissing a boyfriend or girlfriend in the hall, and passing notes as more legitimate than engagement in conventional issues such as acting up in class, talking back, and coming to class late. Non-misbehaving students, in contrast, did not differentiate between these two types of issues. Furthermore, misbehaving students were also more likely than non-misbehaving students to reject the school's authority to regulate contextually conventional issues. In other words, contextually conventional issues which are considered to be personal issues outside of school but legitimately regulated inside of school (Smetana & Bitz, 1996) were rejected by frequently misbehaving students more often than conventional issues. For example, school rules prohibit running in the halls yet it is perfectly acceptable to run outside or in a gym.

When asked to justify their beliefs about the legitimacy of engaging in school misbehavior, distinct, significant associations were found between the types of reasoning used by frequently misbehaving and non-misbehaving students. As hypothesized, a positive association was found between school misbehavior and the use of personal and the use of pragmatic justifications; frequently misbehaving students more often appealed to personal and pragmatic reasoning in justifying their engagement in school misbehavior. For example, using the issue of coming to class late, misbehaving students often provided justifications such as, “Because, it is my choice if I want to come late to class”, or “Because it is not always my fault, like if my teacher held me late in their class and I couldn’t get to my class on time.” In contrast, school misbehavior was found to be negatively associated with conventional and prudential justifications as misbehaving students were less likely to appeal to conventional concerns and potential consequences for the self. For example, non-misbehaving students often explained that it would not be OK to come to class late because, “I could get in trouble”, or “I might miss important information and fail tests if I don’t come to class on time.”

In terms of students’ justifications for judgments regarding the legitimacy of school authority to regulate misbehaviors, self-reported engagement in school misbehavior was found to be negatively associated with conventional reasoning and positively associated with personal reasoning. In other words, students who engaged in more misbehavior were more likely to assert personal jurisdiction over these issues and less likely to appeal to conventional justifications regarding the degree to which the school should have legitimate authority to regulate student behavior. For example, when asked to explain whether the school should have the right to make and enforce rules regarding passing notes to friends in class, frequently misbehaving students

often said things such as, “Because, if I want to pass a note to my friend, that is my business” or, “They (the school) can try to stop me and say I can’t, but I am probably going to do it anyway”.

Much of the previous research on school misbehavior has taken a more passive approach, focusing more on variables that are external to the adolescent such as school climate. This study, however, demonstrates the utility of examining how students *themselves* think about common school transgressions and who they think should have the legitimate authority to make and enforce rules regulating these misbehaviors. As predicted, results of this study demonstrated that frequently misbehaving students reject school authority to regulate rules governing student misbehavior, instead asserting personal jurisdiction over such issues. This finding in particular offers important insight into why it may be that some students engage in misbehavior and others do not; in this study, frequently misbehaving students more often viewed the transgressions as matters of personal choice and outside the realm of school authority. Non-misbehaving students, however, did not view the transgressions as legitimate and justified their judgments using conventional and prudential reasoning, citing fears of punishment and potential consequences they might suffer.

The application of these results into the overall approach of dealing with school misbehavior could provide guidance counselors, teachers, and principals with a clearer understanding of the reasons students engage in various forms of misbehavior in the first place. By determining the types of reasoning a student uses to justify their misbehavior, the school can potentially contest the student’s maladaptive reasoning and call to attention more positive, constructive ways of thinking about behavior. For example, if a student is sent to the office for misbehaving in class, a guidance counselor could ask that student why he or she thinks it is OK to act up in class. By listening to the student and calling attention to the moral components of

the act such as the negative effect his or her behavior has on other students in the room or the misbehavior's prudential components such as the negative effect on his or her own learning and future, the student is encouraged to think about his or her behavior in a more active manner which could potentially have a strong influence on how the student decides to behave in the future.

Moreover, the results of this study highlight the value of examining the underlying beliefs about school misbehavior held by the students themselves, rather than solely focusing on external variables that may contribute to school misbehavior. Thus, these findings can offer a valuable perspective to current school behavioral management strategies that may be focusing too much on the actual physical behaviors and not enough on what those behaviors actually mean to the students. Moreover, by understanding the meanings these behaviors have to the students as well as how students conceptualize the role of school authority regarding specific transgressions, school administrators can better adjust their disciplinary guidelines in such a way that provides students with a more active role in their school's functioning.

The present study had particular strengths and limitations that should be mentioned. First, the study was multimethodological; using both the questionnaire survey and the interview provided a more detailed understanding of how students think about misbehavior as well as the specific extent in which each misbehavior was considered to be acceptable. Moreover, the structure of the interview allowed students to provide open-ended responses that encouraged students to think about each issue in depth. By not restricting students to simple "OK" or "not OK" answer choices, this study was able to gain a much richer understanding of the reasons for why the misbehaviors are considered to be acceptable or unacceptable.

One limitation of this study would be sample size. Although several of the results did reach significance, a larger sample size would have brought more power to the analyses which may have turned marginally significant findings into statistically significant ones. Although the analyses found that misbehavior was associated with the use of personal and pragmatic justifications, it should be noted that the overall use of these types of justifications was low relative to other types. In addition, the sample was restricted in its use of seventh grade students from a lower-to-middle income school district. Future research would benefit from a larger, more economically diverse sample.

The transition from childhood to adolescence can be a very dramatic phase in a young person's life. Going from a characteristically dependent child to suddenly having more autonomy and choice in what one chooses to wear, how to style their hair, or what types of friends they choose to identify with can be overwhelming, especially when adolescents experience this autonomy in some places and not in others. As discussed previously, when students feel that their school's rules and disciplinary factors are fair, those students tended to be better behaved (Way, 2011). It was also found that simply coordinating fair and respectful adult-student interactions as well as providing students with clear-cut rules and discipline in a consistent manner has drastically counteracted the effects of school misbehavior. Therefore, it becomes very important for schools to find the right balance of order and discipline required to keep students safe as well as making students a part of the rule making process by understanding what the rules really mean to the students themselves.

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Table 1.

*Justification Categories***Moral**

Other's welfare	It is harmful to others; the distraction would hurt others; it would stop others from learning, chaos is affecting others, break a trust; negatively affect others, hurt their feelings
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Fairness	It is unfair; I have a right; cheating
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Social Conventional

Appeals to authority	It is against the rules, one could be punished; need to respect authority; it would be disrespectful, you will get in trouble, you will get a detention; no back talking or sass
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Social norms/ Social order	It is how people do it; it is important to have order; it is what is expected, avoid chaos; we don't want distractions; courtesy and politeness; inappropriate in this context
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Personal

Act is OK	There is nothing wrong with the act; act does not affect others, act does not involve harm
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Personal choice/ Personal Expression	It is my choice; I am the one who decides; it is important to express one's identity; it involves who I am; uniqueness of self
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Prudential

Harm to the self	It is unsafe or harmful to the individual; I could get hurt; it is dangerous; it is bad for your health; any negative effect to the self; I won't learn
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Pragmatics

Pragmatics	Contingency of daily life, an emergency, guidance counselor held them back; exigency beyond one's control; don't be late
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Table 2.

Means and standard deviations of legitimacy of engagement in conventional and contextually conventional issues

	Conventional	Contextually Conventional	All issues
Misbehaving (<i>N</i> =22)	.11 (.19)	.33 (.40)	.22 (.26)
Non-misbehaving (<i>N</i> =30)	.07 (.14)	.08 (.17)	.07 (.12)
All students	.08 (.16)	.19 (.31)	.13 (.21)

Table 3.

Means and standard deviations of legitimacy of school authority over conventional and contextually conventional issues

	Conventional	Contextually Conventional	All issues
Misbehaving (N=22)	.82 (.30)	.71 (.31)	.76 (.27)
Non-misbehaving (N=30)	.96 (.12)	.97 (.13)	.96 (.11)
All students	.90 (.22)	.86 (.26)	.88 (.22)

Table 4.

Means and standard deviations of justifications of legitimacy of engagement and school authority by domain

	Moral	Social Conventional	Personal	Prudential	Pragmatic
Justification of engagement	.27 (.16)	.39 (.19)	.07 (.13)	.21 (.13)	.06 (.11)
Justification of school authority	.27 (.21)	.54 (.25)	.06 (.14)	.08 (.12)	.05 (.15)

Note. Higher scores indicate more disclosure. N=90.

Table 5.

Regressions of gender and problem behavior engagement on legitimacy justifications by domain

	Moral Justification			Conventional Justification			Personal Justification			Prudential Justification			Pragmatic Justification		
	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	ΔF	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	5.41*	.10		2.73	.06		2.16	.06		2.87+	.06		.01	.00	
Gender			.28*			-.29*			-.12			.18			.06
Step 2	3.09+	.06		4.43*	.08		40.86***	.44		6.55*	.12		10.50**	.19	
PB			-.24+			-.29*			.68***			-.35*			.44**
Total R ²		.16			.14			.50			.18			.19	

Note. N=52; PB = Engagement in problem behavior; Betas are for final step in the model; + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 6.

Regressions of gender and problem behavior engagement on legitimacy of school authority by domain

	Moral Justification			Conventional Justification			Personal Justification			Prudential Justification			Pragmatic Justification		
	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	ΔF	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	1.34	.02		.76	.01		.41	.01		.16	.00		.01	.00	
Gender			.13			-.15			-.01			.04			.05
Step 2	.39	.01		4.34*	.07		16.43***	.21		.42	.01		2.53	.04	
PB			-.08			-.26*			.47***			-.08*			.20
Total R ²		.03			.08			.22			.01			.04	

Note. N=52; PB = Engagement in problem behavior; Betas are for final step in the model; + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Appendix A

SCRIPT

Interview

In this part of the study we are going to ask you about your opinions regarding school rules and student misbehavior. There are no right or wrong answers for these questions; we just want to hear what you think. This part of the interview will be recorded so I don't have to write everything you say down right now. The date is *month day, year* and I am speaking to *participant name*.

"I am going to ask you about a few issues on these cards..."

1. "Is it OK or not OK for students to _____?"
 - "Why?" **OR** "Why not?"
 - "Are there any other reasons?" (*probe until no more reasons*)
 2. "Do you think that the school has a right to stop students from _____?"
 - "Why?" **OR** "Why not?"
 3. "Would it be possible to change the rules about _____?"
 - *If yes*, "How?"
 - *If no*, "Why not?"
 4. "Do you think that stopping students from _____ makes the school **run smoother** or function better?"
 - "Why?" **OR** "Why not?"
 5. "Are there rules about _____ **outside of school**?"
- "Now let's talk about _____."